Claims:

1. A method for time stamping a document comprising:

    receiving identifying data associated with said document at an outside

    agency;

    computing at said outside agency a time difference between a

    predetermined time reference and the time of receipt of said identifying

    data;

    creating a time stamp receipt by associating said time difference with said

    identifying data; and

    certifying said time stamp receipt by signing said time stamp receipt at

    said outside agency with a private signature key associated with said

    predetermined time reference.

2. The time stamping method of claim 1 further including transmitting said

    certified time stamp receipt to a designated party.

3. The time stamping method of claim 1 wherein said identifying data comprises

    a digital copy of at least a portion of said document.

4. The time stamping method of claim 3 wherein said identifying data comprises

    a digital representation of said document derived by application of a

    deterministic function to at least a portion of said document.

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5. The time stamping method of claim 4 wherein said digital representation is a hash value derived by application of a one-way hashing function to at least a portion of said document.

6. The time stamping method of claim 1 wherein said time stamp receipt includes a copy of at least a portion of said identifying data concatenated with said time difference.

7. The time stamping method of claim 6 wherein said time stamp receipt includes a digital sequence derived from said identifying data concatenated with said time difference.

8. The time stamping method of claim 1 wherein said time stamp receipt further includes an identification number associated with the document originator.

9. The time stamping method of claim 8 wherein said time stamp receipt further includes a sequential record number.

10. The time stamping method of claim 1 wherein said time reference is stored in a public key certificate.

11. The time stamping method of claim 1 wherein the step of certifying said time stamp receipt includes encrypting said time stamp receipt using a private

signature key controlled by said outside agency, wherein said time stamp receipt can be later verified by decrypting the signed time stamp receipt with a corresponding public verification key.